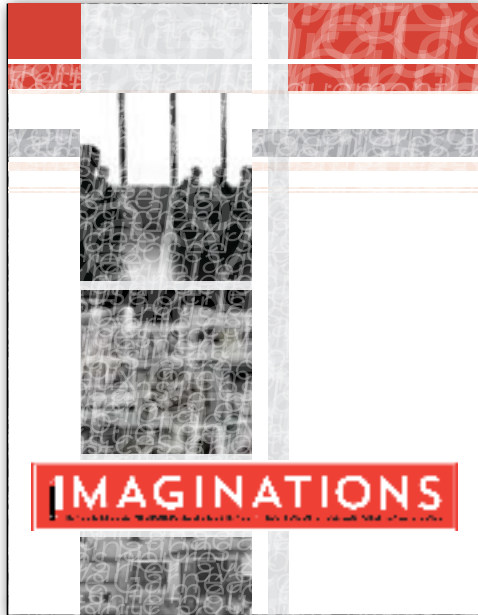


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Soundless Speech / Wordless Writing: Language and German Silent Cinema

Marc Silberman

THE MEDIATIZATION OF SEEING, which set in with the invention of the camera obscura in the seventeenth century and reached an initial peak of mechanical perfection in the moving camera at the end of the nineteenth century, enriched the psychophysics of perception. A whole series of ever more sophisticated technological innovations in optical instruments led to new means of representation and concurrently opened up new ways of imagining the self. What came to be called in 1920s Germany “neues Sehen” or new seeing was the shorthand description for an effect of modern industrial society that literally bombarded the eyes with a shower of visual stimuli. We encounter the breakdown of perspectival focus and the introduction of abstraction in the visual arts; modernist literature adapts techniques of narrative montage connected with memory and interiority; and a new kind of spectator evolves who has experienced the spatial rhetoric of rapid movement associated with trains and automobiles as well as the visual fragmentation associated with photography and cinematography. These creative aesthetic responses were probing the limits of representation and perception but at the same time they threatened to displace verbal language as well as the written word. The primacy of writing, which itself had displaced oral culture in the wake of the Renaissance, was challenged by the media shift to visuality. Yet this by no means erased speech or print; rather the flood of images and the fragmentary techniques of representation based on mechanical means of reproduction forced artists and critics to rethink their assumptions about language and communication. The historical oppositions of *pictura et subscriptio* come into

especially sharp focus in the visual and textual signifying systems of the German silent cinema.

If language loses its communicative and interpretative functions in direct proportion to the loss of its referential grounding, then the modernist crisis is simultaneously a crisis of its signifying practices. The evolution of the silent cinema in Germany between 1912 and 1930 engaged this crisis on at least three levels. Thematically we find here an inflation of psychological stories about ego destabilization, urban alienation, and claustrophobic family life, populated by fantastical doubles, psychopaths, vampires, robots, and golems. Inscribed in the paranoid narratives of self-loss is the modern experience of dissociation and deracination. Aesthetically the silent cinema was exploring new ways to represent such anxieties of modern subjectivity. These included technical innovations in lighting and cameras that allowed for intensely dynamic, expressive space relations as well as a distinct gestural acting style aimed at translating inner emotions into corporeal intensity. Philosophically the ongoing debates about the nature of the cinema as art and entertainment began to reformulate the image-text relation by questioning the hierarchy of terms. Does the silent cinema sponsor a linguistic theory of images based on the idea of “reading” the pictorial discursively, or does it rest on an image theory of language that claims the image as the ground of language’s referentiality?

In this essay I propose to examine the German expressionist cinema as a specific response to the modernist crisis of language in order to describe the diverse cinematic forms of resistance to the word, to articulated speech. I propose to do this from two different directions, even though in practice they were not clearly separate. Some expressionist film makers developed the silence of the silent film into a “gestural language” that dramatized light and movement; others reproduced the silent speech of the film figures by means of graphically stylized intertitles. My thesis is that the expressionist cinema maintained a traditional, idealistic notion of the film as a pure work of art that aimed at a unified composition of all elements: set design, architecture, costumes, make-up, acting, lighting, plot, and even writing. While other avant-garde artistic practices, say, in the theater (Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator), photography (Hannah Höch, John Heartfield), or the fine arts (Max Ernst, George Grosz), integrated the most advanced technical means at their disposal in order to transform traditional art forms and to open up new dimensions of artistic perception, the expressionist film makers missed the opportunity to explore the rich semiotic possibilities of the new technological medium with its hybrid, synergetic forms and provocative force. Hence, the expressionist cinema marks a transition or even the endpoint of a long process of reflection about the communicative possibilities of language that shifted to a

fundamentally new level with the invention of sound cinema at the end of the 1920s.

First of all, we need to recognize that the early cinema was not silent in the sense of soundless; sound had always been present in cinema auditoriums. The widespread assumption that written intertitles substituted for the lack of voices must be qualified. First, beginning in 1903 already there were successful experiments with new technologies of sound accompaniment through the mechanical separation of image and sound. In Germany, for example, synchronized wax disk recordings were especially popular for music and opera films, seeking to reproduce the “authenticity” of performance. These “Messter-Ton-Bilder” (Sound-Images), produced under the brand name of “Biophon,” were commercially distributed with some success until 1913. Also, since the beginning of the cinema live film narrators—like the impresarios and entertainers on *variété* stages—accompanied movies with running commentaries. The narrator, standing in front of or next to the screen, introduced the film, explained the plot, and spoke the dialogues, a tradition that had disappeared entirely only in 1913.¹ Around 1910 an alternative arose to the film narrator in the form of a small group of actors who behind the screen acoustically illustrated the corresponding visual events, but this proved to be only a short-lived fad (Orosz 136). And, of course, by the early teens other kinds of live musical accompaniment were becoming widespread, be they pianos, organs, small ensembles, or large-scale orchestras for gala openings in the new cinema temples in urban centers. In another sense too the silent cinema was not silent. Actors did speak their parts in front of the camera, and viewers saw them moving their lips, although they did not hear them once the “institution” of the film narrator disappeared. Thus, the silent film does show a communicating world but without audible speech, and as a result viewers developed historically conditioned habits of lending the screen figures their own imaginary voices. The audience provided not only their own “spoken” text of unheard voices but also the sound quality of those voices—timbre, intonation, pitch, tonality, not to speak of other sounds and noises such as whistles, rain hitting the pavement, or screeching car wheels that might be represented in film images. In this sense it is impossible to regard the silence of the silent film as a lack; on the contrary, the absence of audible sound constituted its specific communicative condition, the condition of the viewer’s imaginary activity in watching the film.

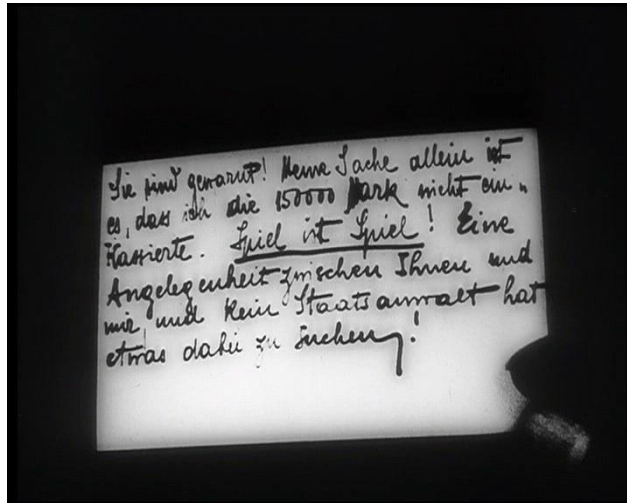
If the silent cinema was from early on not without sound, the new visual medium of moving *images* similarly did not forego text in the form of printed words. From its very beginnings conventionalized print forms of communicating information accompanied the cinema in the texts of program booklets and on advertising posters. Printed words could also be seen in the profilmic space of the moving

images, for example, a shot might show a factory entrance with the company name inscribed on it, a store front with business signs, a street sign or place name, a streetcar with advertisements. Even before the (technological) invention of the close-up shot cinema viewers apprehended visually such diegetical images of words. Moreover, printed credits at the beginning and end of films existed in the earliest phases of cinematography, although at this point they were not yet technically connected to the raw film stock; rather such titles were projected separately by means of the older *laterna magica* technology (Hediger 169). It is relatively obvious that the projection of moving images begins in the medium of print, pointing to its precursors in book culture (the covers and title page of the printed volume) and the stage (the theater program). In short, the shift to mechanically produced visual media around 1900 was from the outset tied to technologies of sound and print.

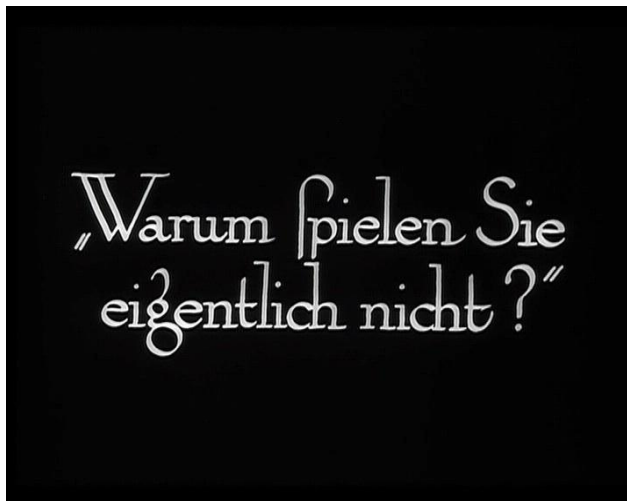
Text-image relations in the silent cinema revolve principally around the use of inserts and intertitles as an integral component of the narrative system. Inserts are functional elements of the narrative fiction; they contain texts of written messages, for example, a letter, a contract, the verse of a poem, the inscription on a memorial, the words on a sign. Often they can be identified by the visual structure of the material on which the text is written (parchment, sheet of paper, page of book) or by the handwriting or typescript. This insert from Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922) shows Edgar Hull's calling card, grasped by a finger in the upper right corner, with the handwritten promise to pay a debt;



the next insert shows the other side of the card, now with the finger in the lower right, and the implicit threat “Spiel ist Spiel” underlined (“A game’s a game”).



Dialogue titles provide direct speech of the film characters (often with quotation marks), while expository titles explain the plot with details about place and time and/or commentary. This dialogue title, again from *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, includes quotation marks for the question at the gaming table: “And why aren’t you playing?”



Edwin Porter used intertitles for the first time in 1903 in the American short “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in order to guide the viewer’s comprehension in an episode lasting more than three minutes (Scheunemann 12). At this time these titles consisted technically of filmed stills of text cards that were edited into the actual film so that they filled the entire screen. Only around 1910 did text and image come together on the celluloid and produce the standardized intertitle: white print on a black ground, a white border surrounding the text, the production firm’s logo on the top or bottom margin, and the title number in a corner of the image. By this point, then, intertitles functioned not only for purposes of narrative clarity but also for economic identity of the production company and for legal protection against unauthorized cuts. After 1914 dialogue intertitles came to dominate, while explanatory text titles became less and less frequent in order to sustain the viewing illusion of continuity. In fact, according to Birett’s (74-82) statistical analysis—albeit based on a very limited corpus of only eighteen international film productions between the years 1908 and 1928—the ratio of intertitles to image shots tended to diminish consistently into the 1920s, while their function as redundant messages for the action or content of the moving images had by and large gone out of style.

Many contemporaries of the silent cinema considered filming and screening still images of printed titles to be incompatible with its essence. In the original, 1911 version of the essay “Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kinos” (Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema) Georg Lukács (304) regards the spoken word as a disruptive tautology:

The “cinema” can only represent actions, not their cause and meaning; its figures have only movements, but no soul, and what happens to them is simply an event but not their destiny. (Therefore—and only apparently because of current technological imperfections—the scenes of the “cinema” are silent: whatever is important in the represented events is completely expressed by what actions and gestures, any speaking would be a disruptive tautology.)²

Similarly, Paul Wegener (13-15), the actor/director who produced some of the first and most impressive “art films” in the mid-teens, formulated the idea persuasively in a much quoted lecture he gave on 24 April 1916: “In the first instance film is a visual matter. The film poet must begin with the image, must think in images, and choose themes that can be expressed visually.”³ Because the film as medium builds on the primacy of the image, the medial shift to printed inserts and titles—according to this widespread view—interrupts the flow of images with its extra-diegetic meta-discourse about the images. Moreover, as an

iconic mode of communication, the motion picture is both accessible and legible to an international audience because images are not filtered through the grid of words and concepts. Theories of perception reinforced this view that images are more accessible in their “flatness” than the “depth” of language about which texts speak (Schnell 150). The immediacy with which an image delivers information analogically—to the extent that the viewer can comprehend it even with a momentary glance—differentiates it from the logical, analytical, sequential structure of a verbal text, and from the abstract form of writing that must be read.

The analogy or metaphor of film as a universal language *because* of its dearth of linguisticity and the ostensible self-evidence of its signs is grounded in idealist conceptions of art and the metaphysics of the image. In fact the silent cinema was compared variously to other non- or pre-linguistic systems of representation with the implication of their freedom from the constraints of language. The performative and expressive aspects of the human body in modern dance, the synthetic nature of pantomime, and the collective consciousness behind folklore and fairy tales were all cited and compared to the cinema’s silence as a liberating feature. Lack of verbal language was not considered to be a deficiency but rather compensation for the elitism of book culture and an opening into imaginative playfulness. The sharp division between literary culture and mass entertainment predisposed German intellectuals in the 1910s and 1920s to project their own desire for access to the popular audience into the utopian potential of the cinema as a universal language (Hake 130-57).

Especially in the years prior to 1914, when there was a strong move to improve the artistic quality of the German cinema, another widespread view argued that the film’s lack of words and its status as a popular medium necessitated stories with simple plots based on emphatic movement and physical actions in order to reduce the spoken commentaries of the film narrator or the printed messages of the intertitles to a minimum. Similar idealistic notions of art and language underlie the idea that pure gestural language is a substitute language or language substitute. If mime and gesture are the most important stylistic components of the film, then—the argument goes—it must be possible to define a standardized repertoire of gestures and expressions. In the context of the modernist crisis of language the silent cinema seemed to provide incontrovertible evidence that gestural language could communicate in ways that verbal language could no longer do in literature and theater. Thus attempts arose to establish a lexicon of hand and body language (“eine Urgrammatik der Gebärden” or a grammar of prototypical gestures) especially for pedagogical purposes in the tradition of handbooks of rhetoric (e.g., Rudenski). This kind of gestology categorizes how an action or function is performed using facial expression, gestures (principally of the hands and arms, but

also of other limbs such as the neck and legs), body posture (how someone sits or stands), and movement of the entire body (standing up, sitting down, walking, running). It should be obvious that this approach to the film actors' "language" naively isolates gestures as if they can be separated from the transitory movement of the medium, analytically grasped, and identified with a particular denotation. Moreover, the idea that a language of gestures can be learned and read hermeneutically not only contradicts the concept of an anthropologically given originary language that is legible and universally understood, it also paradoxically erases the post-Enlightenment conception of the individual subject whose inner feelings are the immediate and direct expression of the self, a conviction that feeds the cinematic cult of the actor as star—the very icon of the individuated, expressive personality.

Nonetheless, gestural acting became one of the hallmarks of the expressionist cinema. In this short clip from Paul Wegener's and Carl Boese's *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (The Golem: How He Came into the World, 1920) we see Graf Florian (Lothar Mützel) and Miriam (Lyda Salmonova) falling in love: the heaving chests, timid yet desiring eyes, tentatively groping hands, and finally the bodies slowly surging toward one another.



[play](#)

Initially the silent cinema inherited this legacy of histrionic acting from the theater,

but it became clear that the gestural repertoire of the stage did not work in front of the camera. The relationship to space and time in the theater is constituted by the distance between the stage and audience and the central perspective defined by the proscenium stage. In the cinema, however, the camera assumes various distances and focuses the spectator's attention from many different shots and angles, which are in turn the result of fragmented shooting of isolated gestures. It is no surprise, then, that the new film stars of the 1910s like Henny Porten and Asta Nielsen did not come from the theater and did not "play to the audience" but rather learned to act for or to the camera, introducing what the earliest film critics and trade press celebrated as their naturalness and realism (Müller 81-86).

Central for this claim to a universal language in the cinema was the focus on the actor's body. Ignoring the mechanical basis for the production of images, the gesture was understood as a primeval linguistic sign and the face as the mirror of the soul, the site of human identity and transcendence. The focus on physiognomy stressed the anthropomorphic, humanist grounding of cinema's silent language; freed from the constraints of fragmentation and alienation, the intact body promised redemption and human community. Béla Balázs's 1924 theoretical treatise, *Der sichtbare Mensch* (Visible Man), might be considered the culminating point in a series of film theories proposed in the course of the 1910s and early 1920s that stress exclusively the visual comprehension of expressive movement as *the art of the cinema*. It is a remarkable document of the sophisticated level this discussion of visual culture had reached but it also illustrates how the idealist grounding of the image maintained the origin of cinematic meaning in the presence of the actor and thus misconstrued the mechanically mediated relationship between reality and representation. The argument reveals a paradox: on the one hand, artistic innovation comes about only through the transformations resulting from the interaction between the arts and the new technical media; on the other, the ultimate goal is the purity of artistic means in each medium. The technical and structural qualities of the popular cinema provide the argument for the specific filmic means of expression that then enable the continuity of high art traditions by employing technologically inspired aesthetic innovations for artistic experimentation.

With this kind of philosophizing about the redemptive quality of visual communication it comes as no surprise that many silent film practitioners, critics, and theoreticians considered intertitles to be a necessary evil, a dramaturgical crutch, or a substitute for inadequate visual narration. On the one hand, they were reacting to the widespread use of titles to camouflage dramaturgical problems. Up into the 1920s it was obviously easier and cheaper to produce such intertitles than to film (additional) non verbal visual material. On the other hand, the very

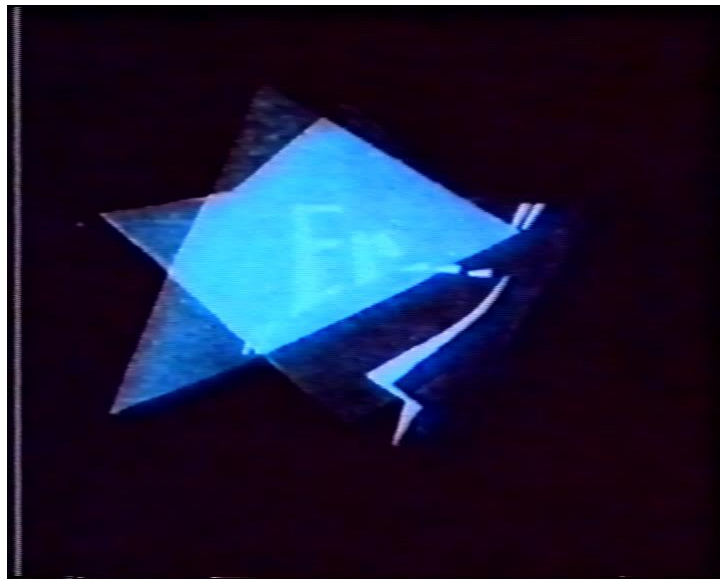
attraction of the new medium lay in the ability of moving images to show a communicating world without resorting to words, that is, without relying on the “exhausted” medium of language. Thus, critic Karl Bleibtreu complained already in 1913 that intertitles were poison for the eyes (“Gift für die Augen”; quoted in Paech 59). Victor E. Pordes (21), a Viennese professor of aesthetics and one of the first to publish a book-length theory of film in 1919, saw a corrosive effect in printed titles, in contrast to the wordless image that offers the spectator the originary feeling (“die ganze Ursprünglichkeit seines Gefühls”). One year later Konrad Lange (85), another scholar, who—as a prominent cinema “reformer”—was committed to raising the lowly entertainment to an artistic enterprise, compared intertitles to pieces of printed paper between the images: “It is inconceivable to me that this crutch’s lack of artistry has not long been recognized.”⁴

There were, however, counter positions. Precisely because the film is an image-dominated medium, the “alien” print medium draws attention to itself. The alternation between printed titles and moving images was recognized by some as an effective element of the editing rhythm and potentially useful in building narrative suspense, especially in chase sequences and thrillers, where all kinds of retarding elements need to be mobilized. Moreover, the image-text relation functions differently in various film forms (for example, documentaries, narrative films, experimental films, or advertisements), and the relation can be constructed in various ways: competing, harmonizing, intensifying, complementing. D. W. Griffith is reported to have reacted ironically to an interviewer’s question in 1926 about the Germans who were by that time making films completely without intertitles (referring undoubtedly to Carl Mayer’s screenplays for chamber films); Hitchcock defended printed titles as an efficient way to accelerate the plot and condense the story (quoted in German in Patalas 222). Theoretically, then, image and text (and later sound, too) are equally productive components in the polyvalent materiality of the film.

The expressionist film invented two different responses that were aimed at sublating the metaphysical commitment to visual presence on to the level of ontological immanence. First, in some films written titles were designed as visual ornaments that transformed the printed word into a graphic image. Second, other films displaced written text entirely in favor of the image and the so-called expressionist acting style. The innovations of the expressionist art, theater, and literary avant-garde peaked soon after the end of the First World War from the perspective of personnel as well as aesthetics. Expressionist film style only began to emerge, however, in 1919, and its emergence was to a large extent the result of a marketing strategy on the part of the blossoming postwar movie industry that

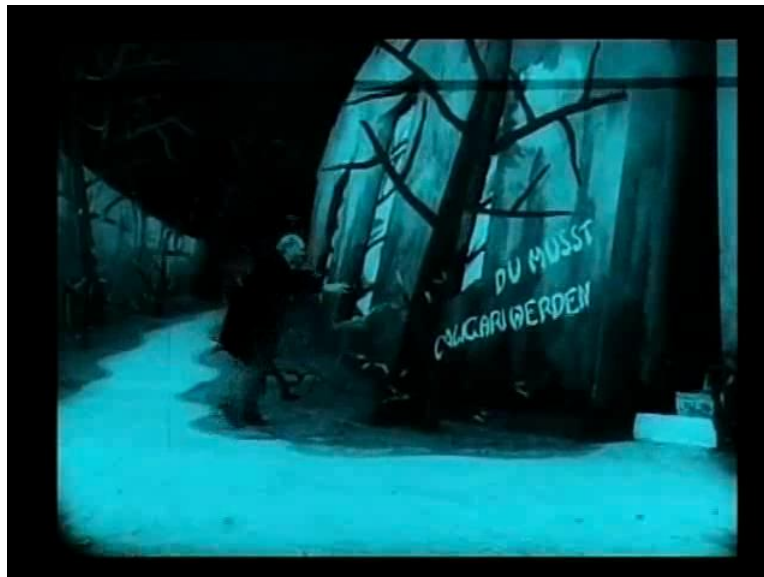
identified a niche for the “art cinema” to support its national profile in the international movie distribution market. Hence, the relatively small corpus of about 40 German expressionist films out of an annual production of almost 200 features during the early 1920s belongs to what cultural historians consider post- or late expressionism among the avant-garde movements. Moreover, these films were specifically produced with an eye toward artistically high quality features and directed at the educated, middle-class public rather than the popular audience. Nonetheless, not a few writers, theater practitioners, and artists saw this development of an expressionist film style as proof that the denigrated “mass culture” was now co-opting even avant-garde energies. In truth the expressionist cinema does introduce something new both from a film historical and aesthetic perspective.

Some examples will clarify this argument, beginning with the 1919 *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari) by Robert Wiene, a key work of German expressionism and international film history. Here we find outstanding instances both of text designed graphically and of graphically designed images as an integral aesthetic approach to visual form. In this respect the film marks not only the beginning of a new film style but in a certain sense also its apex, insofar as the graphic style is remarkably consistent like in no other expressionist feature, as three of the film’s first intertitles illustrate.





The first notable detail in these short intertitles is the ornamental design of the printed text that was drafted by the expressionist artist Walter Reimann. The crude, woodcut print-type is not standardized but rather formed like free-hand writing with pointed and broken lines; the individual letters are irregular, with distorted edges; and the sequence of letters is not arranged on a straight, horizontal axis. Dietrich Scheunemann (24-31) has provided careful exposition of the title designs in the *Caligari* film, pointing out how these graphic qualities in the image of the printed word point to the psychological unease and tension of the film's figures. Behind each of the words is a background as well with broken planes that emphasize the dominant atmosphere of inner turmoil. Finally, the very precision of the intertitles' minimalist, reduced message is a typical device of expressionist stylization to convey heightened emotions. Such intertitles do not serve the story's narrative progress or even mark a specific rhythmic alternation for the editing, rather they intensify the uncanny atmosphere and frightful anticipation at the heart of the narrative. A spectacular example that breaks the frame of the static intertitle is shown in the following clip from the end of *Caligari*.



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It shows nothing less than the staging of writing, since the ghostly words are now themselves integrated into the image as an overlay of text fading in and out. The animation of the words intensifies the feelings of angst as an autonomous

component of the image, and the moving text embodies in itself the paranoia that has taken hold of Caligari. The threatening, aggressive writing becomes a projection of the inner forces and obsessions that haunt him, materializing the unconscious realm of hallucinations in a concrete image. In Wiene's *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* we have an excellent example of expressionist stylization in which all signifiers, even written words, are subordinated to the creation of this out-of-joint world. Like the actors' bodies, the sets' contours, and the painted decors, the printed word has become a scenic element in its plasticity. Here textuality too is a means of visual expression, demonstrating the fluid transition from text into image.

In a certain sense Wiene's *Caligari* mobilized already in 1919 the graphic function of writing as iconic and animated typography, a promising start that withered away, for in the course of the 1920s graphism became more and more ornamental in the narrative film while pictorial animation shifted into other areas such as the movement of crowds. Dimitri Buchowetski's *Danton* (1921), influenced by a stage production of Georg Büchner's play at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, shows the way bodies can be treated as a graphic cipher in the cinema.



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The crowds shot from a low angle and waving their arms rhythmically and then

streaming down the steep steps of the Convent in a frontal shot create a dynamic sense the scenic space. At the same time, however, the camera technique and editing in both Wiene's *Caligari* and Buchowetski's *Danton* were quite restrained. The distinctive dramaturgy of light and movement that would become the real innovations of the expressionist cinema led many film makers to seek new techniques and technologies of lighting and camera movement to narrate film stories. For them printed text was of secondary importance, although they too used discrete intertitles or inserts as an expressive film component with its own aesthetic value, as the following examples illustrate.

In the tradition of *Caligari*—one could almost speak of an intervisual citation—Fritz Lang uses in two episodes from his 1926 *Metropolis* typographically designed inserts as “emotional titles,” adapting to written text the sonic characteristics of spoken language. The individual letters forming the word “Moloch” signal surprise and fear through the special calligraphy of the printed text.



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Similarly, the drops of blood or sweat oozing from the word “Babel”—the latter referring to the biblical tale of desire for universal language and its ultimate lack of fulfillment—animate the very idea of signification, in contradistinction to the

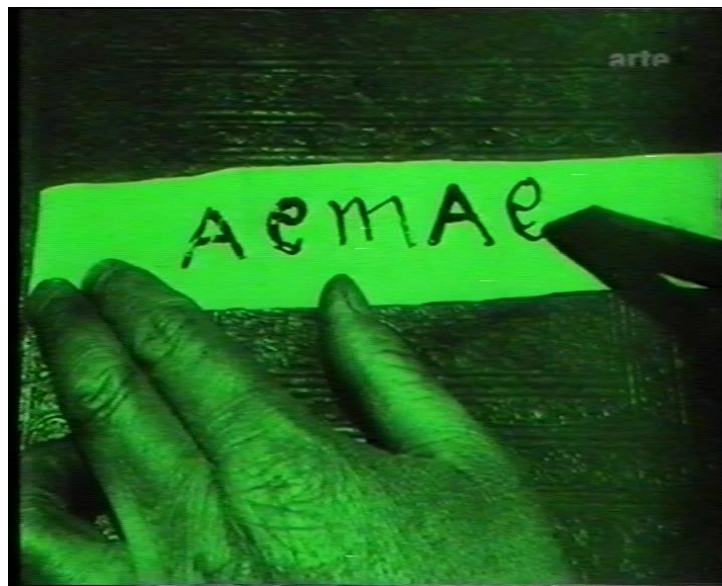
disrupted mechanism of referentiality practiced by modernist texts.



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Writing always has both a figural and a verbal aspect in the sense that it is read as well as looked at. The distinction is trivial until the writing is calligraphically or typographically realized, as in these cases.

To return briefly to *Der Golem*, the plot visualizes the theme of writing itself as the key to life. Inserts show parchment roles with the ruler's decrees that guarantee or destroy the existence of the Jews in their protective ghetto; they show pages from the books that the Rabbi and his assistant study for a clue to the secret of life; and they prominently display the crucial cabbalistic message written on a scrap of paper.



Even more important, however, is the revelation of the word that can awaken the Golem, the man-made clay figure, to life. Here language possesses a transcendent, divine power that—objectified in the word—brings the hidden into the open.

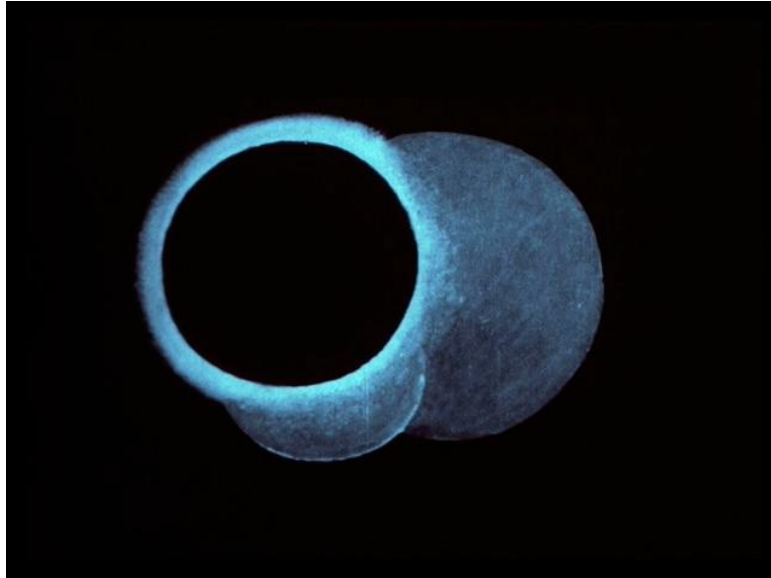
Conjured by Rabbi Loew in a drama of flames, lightening, and storming shapes, Astaroth, the dead spirit, utters the word “aemaet” that manifests itself as ephemeral writing with the breath, for this is the spirit as word that will infuse the inanimate figure with life.



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The graphism of the magic word, achieved here through sophisticated trick effects, shows the writing of the text in moving images as its very reading—and ultimately redemption, since this word will create life. In this case the abstraction of print culture is transformed into the transparency and vitality of visuality.

Some filmmakers pursued a different strategy in the early 1920s, seeking to do away with intertitles entirely. The first experimental films by avant-garde artists were non narrative, abstract visual studies with no intertitles at all. Walther Ruttmann’s “Opus” series of short animated films, for example, stages encounters between light, volumes, planes, and movement in order to explore the dynamic energy of the relationship between time and space.



play

Expressionist chamber films such as Leopold Jessner's *Hintertreppe* (1921) and Lupu Pick's *Sylvester* (1924) strove to reduce the use of intertitles to a minimum and instead conveyed the narrative through other expressive means of the cinema such as gesture, body movement, facial expressions, and contrasts of light and shadow. Since these dramas, based on screenplays by Carl Mayer, explicitly thematize speechlessness or focus on characters who are condemned to silence, it is only logical that the inability to communicate underlying the respective story's tragic fate made the printed form of speech superfluous (Paech 53).

Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Der letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh, 1924) marks a highpoint in this use of the camera for purposes not only of representation but also narration, again based on a screenplay by Carl Mayer. The following examples from different points in the film demonstrate how Mayer avoided intertitles entirely but yet employed printed words diegetically, that is, as part of the visual narration: the illuminated sign of the Atlantic Hotel where the doorman works the front entry, the message on his daughter's wedding cake ("Den Hochzeitsgästen," or To the Wedding Guests), and a cut-in to the exclusive brand name label of a Mumm champagne bottle that denotes class status.



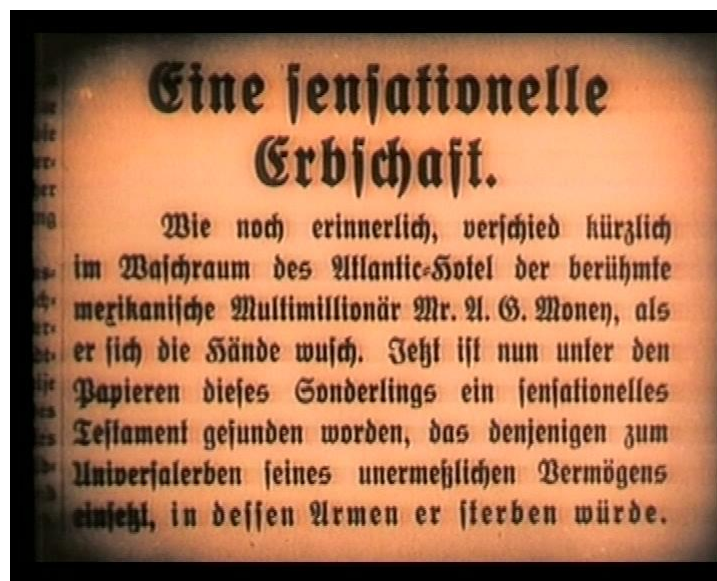


A central sequence shows the protagonist reading his demotion letter. The camera spies on the doorman from outside the manager's office, then passes through the door's transparent glass threshold and assumes the doorman's subjective perspective as he haltingly scans the lines of text and individual printed words. Murnau employs here two perceptual variables that dominate the reading process: duration (focus on letters, words, and sense units) and control (speed, segmentation of meaning, and sequencing or repetition), and he thereby visualizes through the reading of the printed text the protagonist's highly emotional, interior turmoil as he comprehends the shocking news of his demotion to a toilet attendant because of his old age ("Der Grund ist Ihre Altersschwäche," or the reason is your old-age infirmity).



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A later insert of a newspaper clipping introduces the surprising, unforeseen turn of events from a tragic fall to a fairy tale-like happy ending. It reports that the millionaire A.G. Monney died in the toilet attendant's arms, and according to the former's will, his entire wealth is to be claimed by the person in whose arms he dies.



The speechless, subaltern doorman is transformed by the printed announcement into a “speaker”: with demonstrative gestures, winks of the eye, and (silent) whispers—all those familiar gestures of the expressionist actor Emil Jannings—he becomes now the sovereign manager of the waiters and hotel personnel. Murnau shows how film images produce a kind of speech without words, a text without print, a visual narration.

By the mid 1920s film expressionism had already reached its prime. New technological advances provided expanded applications for intertitles and textual images by means of sophisticated optical printers that enabled a more complex and freer integration of text and image. The moving or “unchained” camera, pioneered by cinematographer Carl Mayer in Murnau’s *Der letzte Mann*, also changed perspectival relations as well as the very relation between viewer and screen, creating new visual experiences of dizziness, falling, and climbing, and transforming film acting from the pathos-laden histrionics of the expressionist style to a more flowing style (Prümm 238). Yet the decisive catalyst for revising the cinematic relationship between image and text came from the Russian avant-garde. Building on Vsevolod Meyerhold’s pedagogy of abstract gesture production (biomechanics) and Ilya Ehrenberg’s notion of the mechanization of all gestures, Sergei Eisenstein was the first film maker who tried to connect, for example, film acting with the technical conditions of cinematic medium. He developed a film semantics based on meaning production as a successive process in which a lexicon of gestures can exist only as an inventory of polyvalent elements (Law and Gordon). In other words gestures are not indeterminate but rather they are constituted culturally and historically, and the fact that a film actor—say, Charlie Chaplin—is internationally comprehensible was proof for Eisenstein that the ambiguous polyvalence of gestures defines the very strength of the silent cinema.

Similarly, Soviet film makers like Eisenstein, Vladimir Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov understood the function of intertitles in a fundamentally different way than the German expressionists. The Russian school of montage was based on a constructivist principle that attempted to approximate visually the musicality, rhythm, and tempo of sound, unrelated to speech and the representation of verbal language. Montage editing works with the calculated effects of contrast, antithesis, intervals, and collision in order to produce a dynamic tension. In this context printed intertitles assume a variety of functions from historical quote to expository information about characters, mood, or behavior to the representation of intonation (a crescendo of voices) and tempo (suspense, delay) within a sequence

of images.⁵ The following two examples illustrate how some of these possibilities were adapted in Walther Ruttmann's 1927 constructivist film *Berlin, Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Berlin, Symphony of a Great City). In the first sequence the printed signs of "Anhalter Bahnhof" and "Berlin" have an expository: as they move into view, they announce the train's arrival in Berlin from the countryside in the early morning.



[play](#)

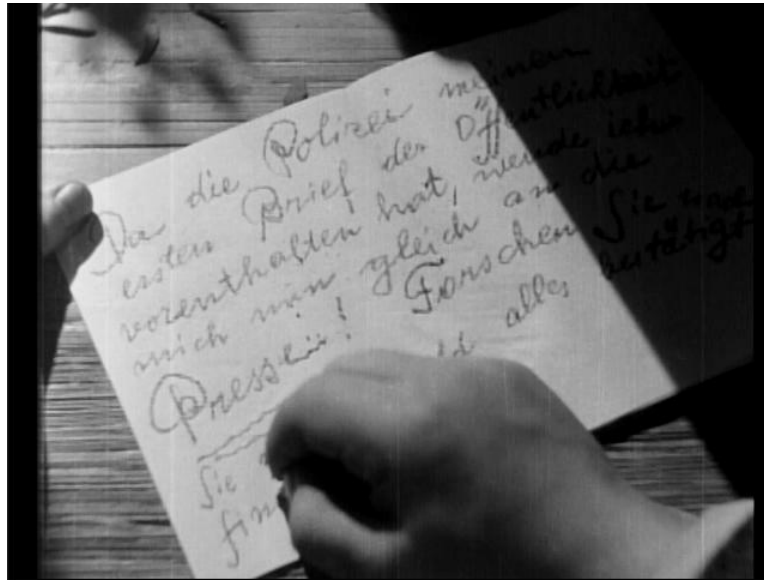
In the second sequence from the afternoon section, the accelerating images of newspaper headlines rolling off the printing presses (Crisis, Murder, Stocks, Weddings, Money) segue into the subjective camera speeding along the tracks.



[play](#)

For Ruttmann the integration of printed signs and moving words generates a rhythm through the tension established vis-à-vis the speeding train and the rotation press. Text and image follow a graphically calculated principle reinforced by the original music (composed by Edmund Meisel) that describes “a day in the life of the metropolis.”

Finally, for the sake of contrast it is worthwhile to consider two examples of notable image-text relations from the early sound cinema. Fritz Lang’s *M* (1930) no longer needs intertitles but insists on pointing out the insufficiency or displacement of writing in the now reconfigured media partnership of text, image, and sound. In this detective story an entire city has been set on edge because of the anonymous (written) letter of confession circulated by a serial child murderer. Perched behind the still unknown man, the camera focuses on the writing of the postcard, while the sound track carries the absent-minded, nervous whistling of the tune that will ultimately give away the culprit’s identity (a brief passage from Edvard Grieg’s *Peer Gynt Suite*, “In the Hall of the Mountain King”).



[play](#)

Moreover, the sound bridge of the voice-over reading the “wanted poster” (10,000 Mark reward...) connects visually the sound, words, and printed message. In this very early talkie the serial murders can be solved only by means of sound when a blind beggar, that is, someone who can not see, recognizes the whistled tune he connects with the murderer’s presence of the murderer. Writing is only one device, but yet a crucial one in tracking the culprit, for the pursuers trace the letter “M” in white chalk on the black overcoat of the suspected killer in order to make him visible for their pursuit. In contrast, Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht’s 1932 *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* (Kuhle Wampe or Who Owns the World?) still employs intertitles in an early sound film as a self-reflexive structuring device. The disruption of visual and narrative continuities by the calculated placement of interruptive titles articulates an aesthetic response, often with an ironical punch, to the miseries of modern, urban life. The neighbor woman, in this example, comments matter-of-factly on the suicide of a young man in her apartment house: “He still had the best years in front him,” punctuated by the sound of the hearse door closing before we see it drive off, and then followed by the insert: “Das schönste Leben eines jungen Menschen” (The best years of a young man).



[play](#)

Brecht's radicalization of the autonomy of all aesthetic elements in the Epic Theater and the cinema ("die Trennung der Elemente" or separation of elements) corresponds to his socio-political intention of not only communicating knowledge to the audience but also positioning the audience to produce it. The play with discontinuities between image, dialogue, sound, and text in this example from *Kuhle Wampe* aims at the activation of the audience, pulls her out of a contemplative reception mode that can arise in a highly emotional story, such as this one about the suicide of a young man.

To conclude, I have shown how the status of language in the German silent cinema was positioned within a context of competing practices and discourses during a momentous shift in the mediatization of seeing. The expressionist film specifically is defined by its pictorial understanding, paying close attention to lighting and set design in order to create innovative, sometimes intentionally confusing interior and exterior spaces; it is also oriented primarily toward literary and painterly sources. This formal sophistication did succeed in demonstrating the artistic quality of the new medium to a mass audience, but at the same time its formal coherence, which also included gestural acting and graphically inspired intertitles, purposely disguised the medium's technological innovations that challenged traditional, institutional ideas of art. As a result, the relationship to the mechanical means of representation yielded an experimental cinema, but one that displaced the alienation of modernity into interiorized narratives of angst and

dislocation and into an aesthetics of the image sustained by a strong anti-technological thrust. “Neues Sehen,” the new seeing to which the expressionists were committed, just like the other historical avant-gardes, sought to expand visual perception as a pre-condition of revitalizing modern culture. They saw redemptive value in the cinema’s turn from the abstraction of print culture to a new kind of transparency and visibility. In other words the philosophical and metaphysical dimensions of the mediatization of seeing were recognized from early on. But the cinema as a technical medium, the realization of the media-specific construction of expressivity in front of the camera into forms of filmic representation on the screen would have to wait for other innovations and models.

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Image Notes

Still images 1A and 1B:

Inserts, two sides of Edgar Hull's calling card, Fritz Lang, *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922)

[DVD grab, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2004]

Sill image 2:

Dialogue title from Fritz Lang, *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922)

[DVD grab, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2004]

Clip 1:

Flirtation between Graf Florian (Lothar Müthel) and Miriam (Lydia Salmonova) from Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920)

[DVD clip, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2004, new music by Aljoscha Zimmermann]

Still images 3A, 3B, 3C

Intertitles with expressionist graphic design from Robert Wiene, *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (1919): “Er” (he), “Nacht” (Night), “Warten!!!” (Wait)
[DVD grabs, © Film Preservation Associates, 1996]

Clip 2:

Graphic writing from Robert Wiene, *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (1919): “Du musst Caligari werden” (You must become Caligari)
[DVD clip, © Film Preservation Associates, 1996, new music © Timothy Brock, 1996]

Clip 3:

Crowds streaming forth from Dimitri Buchowetski, *Danton* (1921)
[VHS clip, © Bundesarchiv Berlin]

Clip 4:

Graphic writing of “Moloch” from Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1926)
[DVD clip, © Films sans frontières, 1999, new music by Galeschka Moravioff]

Clip 5:

Graphic writing of “Babel” from Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* (1926)
[DVD clip, © Films sans frontières, 1999, new music by Galeschka Moravioff]

Still images 4A, 4B

Examples of writing from Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920): Rabbi Löw and his assistant seek answers in a book titled “Nekromantie – Die Kunst Totes lebendig zu machen” (Nekromancy – The Art of Bringing Life to the Dead); Rabbi Löw writes the secret word on a scrap of paper, to be fastened to the Golem’s chest
[DVD grabs, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2004]

Clip 6:

The divine power of the word from Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920): “aemaet”
[DVD clip, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2004, new music by Aljoscha Zimmermann]

Clip 7:

Excerpt from short animation film by Walter Ruttmann, *Lichtspiel Opus II* (1921)
[DVD clip, © Edition Filmmuseum, 2008, piano score by Joachim Baerenz]

Still images 5A, 5B, 5C

Examples of print from Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, *Der letzte Mann* (1924)
[DVD grabs, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2003]

Clip 8:

The doorman reads his letter of demotion in Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, *Der letzte Mann* (1924)
[DVD clip, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2003, original score of Giuseppe Becce adapted by Detlev Glanert]

Still image 6

Diegetic print shows the newspaper article announcing the surprising plot turn from Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, *Der letzte Mann* (1924)
[DVD grab, © Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau-Stiftung, 2003]

Clip 9:

Signboards announce the train's arrival in Berlin, from Walther Ruttmann, *Berlin, Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927)
[DVD clip, © Edition Filmmuseum, 2008, original film score by Edmund Meisel]

Clip 10:

The headlines roll of a page of the newspaper, from Walther Ruttmann, *Berlin, Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927)
[DVD clip, © Edition Filmmuseum, 2008, original film score by Edmund Meisel]

Clip 11:

Writing and whistling from Fritz Lang, *M* (1931)
[DVD clip, © Atlantic-Film S.A. and The Classic Collection, 1998]

Clip 12:

Interruptive intertitle from Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht, *Kuhle Wampe oder: Wem gehört die Welt?* (1932)
[DVD clip, © absolute medien, 2008]

Endnotes

1 Friedrich Korner mentions a “school for narrators” (“Erklärer-Schule”) in his 1929 dissertation for the University of Vienna, “Der deutsche Film: Tatbestand und Kritik einer neuen Kunstform” (75), quoted in Orosz 135. While the contextualizations and developments in Germany did not necessarily correspond to those in the United States, there are indeed many similarities in technological innovations and trends; for an excellent historical introduction to the complexity of issues in regards to sound in the American silent cinema, see Altman, especially part IV on “Nickolodeon Sound” for an extensive discussion of the film narrator.

2 “Das ‘Kino’ stellt bloß Handlungen dar, nicht aber deren Grund und Sinn, seine Gestalten haben bloß Bewegungen, aber keine Seelen, und was ihnen geschieht, ist bloß Ereignis, aber kein Schicksal. (Deshalb—und bloß scheinbar wegen der heutigen Unvollkommenheit der Technik—sind die Szenen des ‘Kino’ stumm: was an den dargestellten Ereignissen von Belang ist, wird durch Geschehnisse und Gebärden restlos ausgedrückt, jedes Sprechen wäre eine störende Tautologie.)”

3 “In erster Linie ist der Film eine visuelle Angelegenheit. Der Filmdichter muß vom Bild ausgehen, in Bildern denken, und Stoffe wählen, die bildhaft auszudrücken sind.”

4 “Es ist mir unbegreiflich, daß man das Unkünstlerische dieses Hilfsmittels nicht längst erkannt hat.”

5 Van Wert’s discussion of intertitles in Pudovkin’s *Mother* and Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* provides numerous examples for this differentiation of intertitles (101-103). His comments on the intertitles in Wiene’s *Caligari* are less pertinent because he did not have access to the restored film print and because he uses the issue of the film’s intertitles to engage in a speculative argument about the script’s authorship, which in the meantime has been definitively settled, contrary to Van Wert’s assumptions. For additional examples of creative and unusual intertitles, see André Stratmann, “Der Zwischentitel im Stummfilm,” 6 July 2010, <http://www.beepworld.de/members78/stummfilm-fan/zwischenentitel.htm>.